

Clam Lake Elk Herd Update (June 2017)

Population Status: Since our last update, the Northwoods saw a very mild winter and earlier-than-normal spring thaw. Spring weather provided continued cold nights with frost or freezes that delayed spring green-up until May 12 in the southern part of the elk range, May 14 near the Flambeau River State Forest (FRSF) headquarters, and May 17 near Clam Lake. Roadside vegetation had reached the 75 percent green level about three weeks prior. Though there were some delays in some preferred elk forage, generally speaking we had an early spring. For the first time in 17 years the aspen saplings leafed out after red and sugar maples. The lateness of woody plant “leaf out” delayed the important component of abundantly-available forage for pregnant elk. Similarly, calving activity started a little later this year. Though a later-than-normal deer rut was observed in Sawyer County in 2016, there was no clear indication that the elk rut was delayed. The irregularities of this Spring’s phenology didn’t seem to negatively impact calf survival, and so far the 2017 calving season appeared to be “average”. Plenty of newborn calves have been seen.

It’s still too early for cow:calf ratios to be meaningful and better information is anticipated from camera grids later in the fall, but incidental observations reveal good productivity this year and promising calf survivorship through the end of June. Twenty-eight Kentucky (KY) elk (5 bulls, 10 cows, 5 bull calves and 8 cow calves) were delivered to the FRSF quarantine pen on March 23, completed their 120 day quarantine and health testing requirements in early June, and will be released after calves are born in early July.

Elk Recruitment and Mortality: Numerous elk sightings have been reported by citizens and resource managers, providing insights into distribution, herd health and numbers. Many of those sightings confirm good survivorship of calves so far. One calf was killed as a result of vehicle collisions on Highway 77 near Clam Lake this summer.

An estimated 35 calves were born to resident elk this spring. With recruitment, released KY elk and factoring in observed and projected losses, we estimate that there are currently between 186 and 198 elk in Wisconsin’s northern elk herd.

Elk Research on the Clam Lake Elk Herd: Collection of data cards and replacement of batteries on the Clam Lake “Snapshot” camera grid continues and is primarily being conducted by volunteers. In April and May, a new 100 camera grid was initiated covering 100 square miles (a 10 mile X 10 mile grid) centered over the FRSF quarantine pen, in preparation of monitoring the southern cohort of the Clam Lake Elk Herd. Good images are anticipated during the fall rut and into winter that will provide insights into the make-up of the herd and elk survivorship. This research and continued telemetry monitoring will lay the foundation for an accurate, precise, cost-effective, and sustainable elk monitoring system that will inform many aspects of herd management, including elk harvest in the future.

A new elk/wolf telemetry research project is tentatively scheduled to start during the winter of 2017/18. Funded by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF), this project calls for the placement of 20 GPS collars on elk in the Clam Lake vicinity along with 5 wolves from representative packs in that area, and 5 wolves in the FRSF. These radio collars will have “proximity” recording functions that will allow for the monitoring of elk/wolf interactions, thereby gaining insights in predator/prey relationship between elk and wolves. Clam Lake elk project staff hope to initiate local elk trapping after the 2017 gun deer season to capture elk and place those 20 collars. Wolf collars have already been deployed for this research by USDA-Wildlife Services.

Elk Habitat Improvements: Elk project staff plan to add 16 acres of plantings and about 100 acres of mowing to the Flambeau River State Forest (FRSF) in 2017. Telemetry, observations and trail camera images have verified elk use on these managed acres. During 2017, staff will continue to spend about \$16,000 of combined Turkey Stamp, National Wild Turkey Federation and RMEF funding for habitat improvements. A new mowing and gated trail/opening rejuvenation project was also initiated thanks to over \$15,500 in funding from RMEF.

Timber sale setup continues on the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest (CNNF) by way of a combination of regular timber sales, stewardship contacts, and Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) sales. Established in 2014 the “Good Neighbor Authority” allows the Forest Service to hire state and county foresters to do the field work setting up timber sales on the CNNF. Furthermore, the ongoing National Environmental Policy Act review for management on the “Black/Torch Project” should be completed soon.

More Elk Coming: As already mentioned, the first installment of KY has been delivered, health tested and released onto the FRSF. Another installment is expected to be pursued in 2018, with the hope of capturing 50 elk.

Partnership Efforts: Forest Service and WDNR elk staff led a tour of some 20 birders through the Clam Lake area on an elk tour in May. Members of the team that went to Kentucky included WDNR wardens, biologists, and technicians, but also included USFS staff and WDACP Veterinarians. As already mentioned, the DNR and USFS are cooperating under the Good Neighbor Authority, and this effort will continue to pay big elk habitat dividends into the future. When the elk arrived at the FRSF quarantine facility on in March, Tribal Members of the Ojibwa Nation, USFS, County Board Supervisors from Sawyer, Ashland, Price and Rusk Counties, Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, Wisconsin Conservation Congress, and WDNR greeted the KY elk.

Information and Education: Elk project staff gave an elk presentation to about 150 participants of the Flambeau Chapter of the RMEF annual banquet in April; an elk presentation and tour for 11 Northland College students in May; and a collaborative tour with USFS to 20 some participants in the 2017 Chequamegon Bird and Nature Tour. A tour was also provided to Winter School District kids in June, and to the 2017 class of new WDNR biologist during their training tour. A tour of the translocation quarantine facility was also given to approximately 50 participants at the 23 March arrival of KY elk.

Future Focus: Beginning in early January, 2018, a team of elk trappers from Wisconsin and Kentucky hope to capture up to 50 Kentucky elk to bring back to the FRSF! After being release next summer -- each one wearing a new GPS tracking collar -- elk project staff will begin another busy field season monitoring radio collared elk, and creating new, and maintaining established, habitat on the Clam Lake Elk Range.

Laine Stowell, 11 July 2017.